The Second Sunday of Advent
Saint Mary the Virgin, Saint Briavels & Saint Mary Magdalene, Hewelsfield, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I remember having lunch, years ago now, with an ecumenical colleague of mine in a previous parish in which I worked. It was really interesting talking to him about the differences between the way in which his church was organised, and the shape of his weekly diary, and mine. I was a Church of England parish priest, and he was a member of another Protestant denomination. The reason that lunch sprung to my mind when I was preparing something to say on this Second Sunday of Advent was because we got onto talking about prophecy. This Protestant colleague of mine was talking about the joys and sorrows of ministry in his particular denomination, and one of the interesting things that he mentioned was that because he was employed directly by that church, that congregation, and paid by the leaders, or elders, of that church, he found it quite difficult to preach prophetically, to tell hard truths to the congregation, because they have the power, if they wished, to dismiss him within a couple of weeks and look for a different pastor. I remember him saying to me: it’s fine when I have things to say which they want to hear, but when I don’t, when I feel that I need to say something that will be difficult for them to hear, I’m always very well aware that the people to whom I’m preaching are the people who pay my salary.

I was struck by that conversation, and have often reflected on what the place of the minister is in any congregation to ask questions, to challenge a congregation, perhaps even to say things that they really don’t want to hear. Is that part of the work of a preacher, and if so how, and what you do if they are are also the people who pay your wages?

The Second Sunday of Advent, in the general shape of the preaching laid out for this season of preparation, is often titled the Sunday of the prophets. That’s prophets with a ‘ph’, the ones with long robes and huge beards, rather than what you hope you’ll earn from a really successful Christmas fair!

Next Sunday really has a strong focus on John the Baptist as an individual, and of course the Fourth Sunday of Advent is when we focus on the Blessed Virgin. But, of course, John the Baptist was a prophet, in fact is often referred to as the ‘last of the prophets’, because in a way he is the hinge point, he straddles the point where the Old Testament becomes the New Testament. And so we hear readings about him this week and next week, and this morning there’s a real focus on his ministry of prophecy.

And, like most prophets, and indeed like my friend the minister all those years ago, some of what he has to say is not terribly palatable. “Repent!” In other words: turn around. Say you’re sorry. Recognise your guilt. And then later, he really endears himself to his listeners by saying, ‘you brood of vipers!’ That’s the way to make people like you isn’t it! You brood of vipers! In other words, you slippery, poisonous dangerous people. Snakes don’t get a great press in the Bible do they? I used to work with a colleague at Salisbury Cathedral who had a pet snake, and would always use days like these to try to redeem the image of our slippery friends. But it’s pretty clear what John is saying to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and it isn’t very complimentary. He’s saying, something new is coming, and you guys are not ready for it. You are hiding from reality. You’re hiding from the truth. You are relying on your history, on being
children of Abraham. And well, I’m sorry, but that is not going to cut it. You are going to be cut down like a tree and burned in the fire.

Being a prophet is, I suspect, never comfortable. Bad things happen to prophets. Jeremiah, one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets was famously thrown into a toilet for going around saying “thus says the Lord.” And Isaiah, from whom we read a lot during Advent, had similar things to say.

Do you remember the great Advent him, ‘O come, O come, Emmanuel? [We sang it last week didn’t we?] Each verse uses a different name to describe God, and one of those verses begins “O come, thou Rod of Jesse, draw the quarry from the lion’s claw.” And that is taken directly from this morning’s Old Testament reading. “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse… The root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples.” Way, way back six or 700 years before Jesus was born Isaiah was calling out, warning the people, saying this old tree is not as dead as you think it is. A new, green shoot, is going to emerge. Something new is coming, something green and growing, connected to the past, and is going to be about equity, fairness, kindness, righteousness. All the things that, by association, the prophet was accusing the people at the time of not being. You are not being fair, you’re not being kind, you are not being righteous, you’re not treating people equally. So watch out, because all of that is on the way.

And it wasn’t popular then, and it’s not popular now. But you know, it has never stopped being the job of the church, the job of the Christian, to listen to the prophets, and also to try to be prophets. And the trap we fall into is either going along completely with the ways of the world, you know colluding with injustice and discrimination where we see it because that makes for an easier life, or we fall into the trap of being strident, arrogant, rather undiscerning people, very quick to criticise but less quick to apply the same criteria to our own lives.

On Thursday we go to the polls in another general election. And again, I’m not going to preach about that, and certainly not going to tell you how to vote. But one of the things that I have noticed about the campaign this time around which I think is even more evident than in previous years is the way in which truth has become elastic, and so has responsibility. I watched all of the Andrew Neil interviews last week, and pretty much every party leader was challenged about truth and about responsibility. “Will you tell us the truth about…?” And “would you like to apologise for…?”

The world has never stopped needing prophets. A prophet is someone who notices the signs of the times. Popular culture thinks about prophets as fortune tellers, or magicians predicting the future. It’s much less about that. It’s much more about saying, ‘have you noticed what is happening?’ ‘Can you see the discrimination around you? Can you see the suffering? Can you see the pain? Can you see the cruelty?’ And can you see where you can fight it? And, and this is the toughest bit, can you see where you are responsible for it? Can you see where you are complicit?

And those are probably not the sort of questions that any politicians are comfortable answering, because by definition the answers are medium and long term. And they’re personal. And they require a degree of soul-searching that we really squirm away from. And they’re not easily answered in soundbites.

But this is the work of Advent. This is one of the reasons why the church works in seasons and cycles. Because every year we are forced to look inside ourselves again, and at the church in all of its inadequacy and complicity. And at the society in which we
live. And part of lighting the second candle of Advent is about being brave enough to listen to the voice of the prophets who speak to us, and being brave enough also to be the prophet that God might be calling us to be. Because unless we are screwing our eyes very tight indeed, it is almost impossible to avoid the parts of our lives that don’t match that vision of Isaiah of the world of righteousness, equity, faithfulness and peace. If we can identify just one place this week where we can speak into that, with the promises of the baby of Bethlehem, we begin a revolution. Or rather we align our lives with the God who is already revolutionising our world.

Because ultimately none of this is done in our own strength. That is the path to disaster. But if we can still ourselves enough to hear the song of the angels, the voice of the prophets, and John the Baptist calling us from the turn of the age, well then, perhaps we will be brave enough to risk the cost, and step out in faith.

Amen.